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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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And that was the week that was! Yikes! If you’re an A-ONE reader and happen to be on our e-mail distribution list, you’ve probably been on the receiving end of a lot of errant e-mails this past week. Our old server has been acting up for the past few months and we’ve been in the process of getting everything ready to move to the new server and get it up and running. Well, there have been a few (okay, a lot!) of bumps along the way. And to make matters worse, Joe and I were exchanging e-mails without realizing that one or both of us were writing/responding to the e-mail list.

So, I just wanted to add my apologies to those of you who got buried in messages last week. It shouldn’t have happened, but it did. We’re hoping that the switch to the new server is completed soon, with minimal issues. In the meantime, we’re bandaging up the old one in the hopes that it will hold up and continue to support the various functions it performs (or performed). So, please bear with us just a little while longer, and before you know it, this comedy of errors will be well behind us!

Until next time...

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Alpha Release: USB Mouse Driver v0.80

I have decided to make the latest version of my USB mouse driver available for public download. This is considered an ALPHA release. There are things to fix, things to add etc, but it is usable and works on ST/TT/Falcon with EtherNat or NetUSBee, in TOS and MiNT. As for MagiC, you’ll have to try it, I don’t own it, so I can’t develop for it.

Get it from the downloads page on http://www.janthomas.org.uk/ and don’t forget to read the text file before you install it!

Obviously, if you don’t have an EtherNAT (http://nature.atari.org) or a NetUSBee (http://hardware.atari.org) there’s no point in downloading it!

Please let me know if you are using it (via the email address on my website, NOT the gmail spamtrap address I use for usenet).

Many thanks for your patience and for being unwilling ALPHA testers! :-)

Coda.

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, it’s been an interesting week to say the least.

When we finally got everything backed up and ready to move to the new server, we never thought that we’d have the problems that we’ve had. As a matter of fact, we were pretty sure that no one would even notice that we were on a new server. But the combination of a newer version of the mailing list software and the migration to the new machine thought otherwise.

I know that Dana wants to mention the "server thing" this week, so I’ll stop here and hope that he hasn’t had to re-write his editorial too much.

Believe it or not, I DO try to curtail my talk about politics here. I mean, after all, it’s a darned computer-related magazine, right? Well, I apologize kids, but I can’t in all good conscience let this one go by without at least taking a swing at it.

Last week, our esteemed leader, ’The Decider’, decided that we Americans have too many rights, and we really haven’t been using the Fifth Amendment anyway. By executive order, the Secretary of the Treasury (or his/her agents) may seize property of any person who they feel is undermining their efforts.

Couple this with the fact that the FBI is now openly stating that they’ve been taking advantage of some of the less savory ’gifts’ given to them by 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, that they’ve been using spyware to grab ’offenders’, and that they’ve abused, broken or openly disregarded even their own rules and guidelines, and I’ve just got to ask myself what other, less well-known members of the governmental alphabet soup (NSA, CSS, CIFA, DSS, NGA, NRO, etc.) are doing ’under the radar’.

Now, there are always going to be those who will tell you that ’we’ need to give up some of the things we’ve become accustomed to... like the right to privacy, the right to face one’s accusers, or the right to protection from unreasonable search and seizure. They say that things are different now, and that if you’ve got nothing to hide, you’ve got nothing to worry about. They say that it’s too hard to stop the people who want to do us harm, and they’re just making it easier for law enforcement to do its job.

Well I’ve got news for you, friends and neighbors. It’s SUPPOSED to be hard! It’s supposed to be hard because if you’ve got to jump through hoops... if you’ve got to cross every "T" and dot every "i"... if you’ve got to exhaust every possibility and give the subject every reasonable doubt, then and ONLY then can you be confident that you’re in the right.

You see, our Founding Fathers knew how genuinely poor a tool the human being was in the pursuit of justice. They knew about what can happen when you react out of fear. They had seen what happens when a government puts the good of the establishment above the good of the individual. That’s why they gave us the Constitution. That’s why they gave us the Bill of Rights. That’s why they made the Executive branch of government the weakest of the three.

It’s this complete and utter disregard for that last one that has me stumped... How many times have leaders substituted their own wishes, opinions or fears for truth? How many times have they begun their campaigns of rhetoric with the words, "Everyone knows that..."? It’s that "everyone knows" thing that has gotten us into trouble so often. With all of that, how is it that we still fall for this? How is it that we can put our own rights above those of someone else’s and not realize that we’re the next in line for ’liberty demotion’? We’re just setting ourselves up for a heapin’ helpin’ of what I call "Freedom-Light"... all the comfort, half the responsibility. Remember: All that need happen for evil to prevail is for men of good conscience to do nothing.

Well, enough of this seditious talk, huh? I can feel the Treasury Department dicks setting their sights on my websites, emails and phone conversations already. Hell, they spied on QUAKERS, for cryin’ out loud! Now THERE’S a bunch just lookin’ to cause trouble, huh?

Let’s get to the news, hints, tips and info available from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

Jason Harmon asks about the maximum hard drive partition size under different TOS versions:

"Does anyone know the maximum partition sizes supported by TOS 1.4 and 2.06? "

Uwe Seimet tells Jason:

"The maximum for TOS 1.04 is 256 MB, for TOS 2.0x and TOS 3.0x it’s 512 MB, for TOS 4.0x it’s 1 GB. Bigger partitions are possible when running MiNT or MagiC. "

’PPera’ asks Uwe to clear something up:

"Interesting... I seen some different values - 512K for 1.04 and 1GB for 2.0x ..."

Uwe tells PPera:

"Everybody is free to try these values (provided one finds a software that allows creating these partition sizes for TOS 1.04 and 2.0x). I do not recommend it because one risks a loss of data. The permitted partition sizes have been well-known for years since some people had a close look at TOS and the maximum values in particular for the number of bytes per sector and the number of sectors per cluster."

PP replies:

"Thanx. On some forums and Wiki sites are those ’optimistic’ values. It will make [for] some discussions there...

Just to add that [I] myself observed troubles with 1GB partition under TOS 2.06."

Uwe tells PP:

"What I find amazing is that there are any discussions at all. For more than a decade there has not been a new version of TOS and the partition size limits for all existing versions of TOS are well-known. These are limits hard-coded in TOS, i.e. they will not change anymore."

Hallvard Tangaraas asks for info on CD-ROM support while booting:

"I successfully installed the necessary software to be able to read from an external SCSI CD-ROM drive a few years ago, but I can’t remember all the details and am now trying to figure out an irritating fact.
Everything works perfectly if:

a) the CD-ROM drive is turned on and

b) a CD (with readable IS-9660 data on it) is inserted into the drive and is ready for use.

However, if the drive isn’t on when the computer boots, then the drivers aren’t loaded and I’m unable to use it later, when turned on. I guess this sort of makes sense even though it would be nice to have the drivers load regardless of the CD-ROM’s current status.

The next problem is more frustrating however..
If I *don’t* have a CD inserted in the CD-ROM drive (or the tray is open), then the driver software won’t load either! Actually the computer seems to freeze at a certain stage in the boot process.

Here are some more details of my setup:
The computer is a Mega STe with an internal SCSI drive connected to the original internal Atari SCSI host adapter card. It’s set at SCSI ID 0 and is unterminated, just as I’ve read and been told numerous times (failing to un-terminate the drive can lead to burning up the host adapter I’ve been told).

The SCSI CD-ROM drive (actually a burner) is connected via a Link 97 to the ACSI port on the rear of the Mega STe. I also have an ICD Link II, but it didn’t recognize the CD-ROM drive, so I suppose it uses

arbitration, which the Link 97 supports, I've been told. The CD-ROM drive is set to SCSI ID 3 and is terminated.

When it comes to software I've first got HDdriver 6.13 which, when booting, gives me the following information, which tells me that it recognizes both SCSI devices:

```
ACSI 0.0:  Quantum LPS540S
ACSI 3.0: Yamaha CRW4416S
```

Next, it loads a bunch of AUTO programs, the ones concerning the CD-ROM drive being as follows:

```
Atari MetaDOS  (April, 2 1997)
Version 2.74
```

... and then:

```
Spin! /SD 0.34
```

... and finally the one which gives me problems:

```
SCSI-treiber v5.00
```

.... with a CD inserted I get a bunch of confirming messages, but without a CD inserted or the tray open when the CD-ROm drive is turned on I get the following message which stays there indefinitely

```
Scanning busses....
ACSI... 00
```

At this stage, all I can do is reset the computer.
Is this normal behavior of this setup? I know there are other software solutions around for enabling CD-ROM reading support, but I was aiming for a free one, at least to start with.

Actually I just noticed that if I turn off the CD-ROM drive, the boot process continues with a "not loaded" message concerning the CD-ROM driver."

'PPera' (one of these days I'll remember to ask for a full name) tells Hallvard:

"This is what we have. CD support is far from satisfying. You should go on some commercial solution.

Writing CD drivers from hobby is simple not possible - there is too much documentation required. It costs time and money."

Uwe Seimet admonishes PP:

"Julian Reschke's SPIN! is (or at least was) available for free, which IMO means that he wrote it as a hobby. I doubt that writing a CD-ROM driver needs more time than writing a hard disk driver, and there are also free hard disk drivers.

By the way, there is a way to use data CDs without a CD-ROM driver, but it requires a CD-ROM drive that supports 512 physical bytes per sector.

In particular with old CD-ROM drives there were jumpers to configure this. With such a drive one can write a sector copy of a hard disk to the CD and then boot from it with HDDRIVER."

Hallvard explains to Uwe:

"The issue isn't that I want to boot directly from a CD, but rather that I don't want the computer to freeze if it boots without any CD in the CD-ROM drive.

Will buying commercial CD-ROM software ("Extendos" from Anodyne?) do away with this problem?

Is there other software that I could try out to see if it solves my problem?"

Uwe replies:

"I think so, just ask Anodyne. The computer freezing is definitely not normal when no CD is inserted. I have never had this problem with my Atari.

You can also try out SPIN!, but I do not know a current download link."

Well folks, I'm going to call it a day. That's about all the stuff for this week. I'd better get outta here before the men in dark suits show up a'knockin' on my door. [grin]

Make sure you tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - 'Halo 3' To Save Xbox 360?
Iran's New Game, Response!
It's Time for Baseball!
And much, much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Nintendo vs. Sony vs. Microsoft

News from the virtual world:

* E3 MINI: This year's version of the Electronic Entertainment Expo - newly christened the E3 Media & Business Summit - was much smaller than last year's, but it wasn't just the lack of crowd noise that made it seem a lot quieter. Last year, Sony and Nintendo were still gearing up for the launches of the PlayStation 3 and the Wii, respectively, while Microsoft was trying to build momentum for the Xbox 360. Now that the pre-launch jitters are out of the way, all three companies are focused on finding a larger audience.

* Wii ALMIGHTY: Nintendo had the most to crow about, with Wii sales gaining on the 360 and the DS dominating portable gaming. The company didn't make any big new software announcements, concentrating instead on 2007 releases like "Super Mario Galaxy" and "Metroid Prime 3: Corruption" (for the Wii) and "The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass" and "Brain Age 2" (for the DS).

Nintendo did show off some new peripherals designed to appeal to the more casual gamers who have made the Wii a smash. The Balance Board is a pressure-sensitive panel, about the size of a bathroom scale, that you stand on while working out to the company's new "Wii Fit" software. The Wii Zapper turns the Wii remote into a gun, for shooting games like Capcom's "Resident Evil: Umbrella Chronicles"; the Wii Wheel turns it into a steering wheel, for driving games like the next-generation "Mario Kart."

During his E3 press conference, Nintendo of America president Reggie Fils-Aime noted that the Wii has been sold out every week since its debut last year - and executives acknowledged that shortages are likely to continue through this year's holiday season.

* CENTRAL STATION: Sony led off E3 with a $100 price cut on the current PS3 and the announcement of a new model with a heftier hard drive. But any positive vibes were dissipated later in the week when a Sony executive revealed that the older model was being discontinued - so the $499 PS3 deal will last only until inventory runs out. A Sony representative told the Next-Gen Web site, "We have ample inventory to meet the immediate needs of consumers in (North America) for several months to come," but the switcheroo seems like it's bound to confuse consumers.

Most of the games Sony showcased were previously announced works-in-progress like "Killzone 2," "Uncharted: Drake's Fortune" and "Heavenly Sword." "Sly Cooper" developer Sucker Punch showed up with a new superhero franchise, "Infamous," while the PlayStation Network will be getting an intriguing new 3D puzzler called "Echochrome."

Meanwhile, the PlayStation Portable is getting a makeover. The new model will be slimmer and lighter, and its battery will last longer (thank goodness). It will also have video output, so you can play PSP games on your TV at home.

* X OVER EASY: The Xbox 360 currently has the most wide-ranging game library of any of the three new consoles, and Microsoft vice president Peter Moore spent most of his E3 presentation talking about the system's exclusives. The big gun, of course, is "Halo 3," but the supporting players in the 360's 2007 lineup - "BioShock," "Blue Dragon," "Mass Effect," "Project Gotham Racing 4" - make the console pretty much indispensable.

Microsoft did make one concession to the "party game" market that Nintendo's Wii has opened up. The most family friendly new title for the 360 was "Scene It? Lights, Camera, Action," based on the popular board game. The Xbox version includes 1,800 new trivia questions and will be packaged with four "big-button" control pads, meant to appeal to players who may be intimidated by traditional video-game controllers.

* NEW IN STORES: Is it time for football already? EA Sports brings on "NCAA Football 08" (for the Xbox 360, PlayStation3 and PlayStation 2), while 2K Sports returns to the gridiron with "All-Pro Football" (360, PS3). ... EA Sports also has "Rugby 08" for the PS2. ... Sony brings "Hot Shots Tennis" to the PS2 and "PaRappa the Rapper" to the PlayStation Portable. ... Namco Bandai tells "Tales of the World: Radiant Mythology" on the PSP.

'Halo 3' Called On To Combat Xbox 360 Woes

Microsoft is counting on the biggest weapon in its video-game arsenal, Halo 3, to boost the Xbox 360's fortunes after the company's warranty problems.

At the company's event Tuesday on the eve of the E3 video game industry convention, Bungie Studios showed the first live footage from the second sequel in the best-selling sci-fi combat series.

Halo 3, which arrives in stores Sept. 25, will come in three flavors: a $60 standard edition; $70 for a limited edition with a bonus making-of disc and art book; and $130 for a limited "Legendary" edition that comes in a Spartan military helmet case.

The first two games in the Xbox-exclusive series have sold a total of nearly 15 million copies.

"If it wasn't for Halo, the Xbox wouldn't exist today," says Van Baker of information technology research firm Gartner. "It's going to make or break their fortunes this year on Xbox 360."

Microsoft also will bring to market a special green-and-gold-finished Halo 3 Xbox 360 system with matching wireless controller, headset and 20GB hard drive (available in September, no price set).

Microsoft also previewed two new popular-franchise entries with release dates sandwiching Halo 3's: Madden NFL 08 (EA Sports, Aug. 14) and Grand Theft Auto IV (Take Two Interactive, Oct. 16). Microsoft has a deal for exclusive GTA IV content to become available on the Xbox Live online service next spring.

"The only place you can play all three games is on Xbox 360," says Peter Moore, vice president of Microsoft's Interactive Entertainment Business.

The company hopes to see no downturn in hardware sales after last week's announcement it was extending Xbox 360 warranties from one to three years. The company made the move in response to a larger-than-expected number of units failing prematurely.

Early reports from retailers found no slowdown, Moore says. "I'm

optimistic, quite frankly, that we have broken down any purchase barrier with consumer confidence to the Xbox 360 console by standing by it with the extended warranty," he says.

However, Baker says, Microsoft could reassure potential buyers with "a statement that we know what caused the problems."

Among other games for Xbox 360 due for the holiday season is a movie trivia game, Scene It? Lights, Camera, Action (no price set). It features HD movie clips and four new controllers "with a huge button in the middle," Moore says. "If you know the answer, you hit it."

* Electronic Arts will unveil early footage of games being developed with director Steven Spielberg. One is an action game, code-named LMNO (for Sony PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 and PCs); the other, PQRS (for Nintendo Wii), involves manipulating blocks a la Tetris. Spielberg got the Tetris-like idea after playing tennis on the Wii with Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto (creator of Mario, Zelda and Donkey Kong). "I am truly enjoying the creative collaboration, and we hope that gamers will be as excited as we are about what we can bring to the medium through our shared vision," Spielberg said in a statement.

* Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock (for PS3, Xbox 360 and Wii, due this fall from Activision, no price set) will include an original track from Slash of Velvet Revolver, former guitarist for Guns N' Roses. Slash will appear as a character as well. His former band's song, Welcome to the Jungle, will be featured in the game, as will more than 20 unlockable Gibson guitar models.

Iran's New Game: 'Rescue Nuke Scientist'

An Iranian hard-line student group unveiled a new video game Monday that simulates an attempt to rescue two Iranian nuclear experts kidnapped by the U.S. military and held in Iraq and Israel.

The "Rescue the Nuke Scientist" video game, designed by the Union of Students Islamic Association, was described by its creators as a response to a U.S.-based company's "Assault on Iran" game, which depicts an American attack on an Iranian nuclear facility.

"This is our defense against the enemy's cultural onslaught," Mohammad Taqi Fakhrian, a leader of the student group, told reporters Monday.

Iran and the U.S. have been in a standoff over Iran's nuclear program, which Washington alleges is a cover for developing atomic weapons. Tehran denies the charges and says its nuclear projects have peaceful purposes.

Tensions also have escalated over the detention of five Iranians in Iraq. U.S. authorities have said the five include members of Iran's elite Quds Force, which is accused of arming and training Iraqi militants. Iran has denied the allegations and insists the five are merely diplomats.

In "Rescue the Nuke Scientist," U.S. troops capture a husband-and-wife team of nuclear engineers during a pilgrimage to Karbala, a holy site for Shiite Muslims, in central Iraq. Game players take on the role of Iranian security forces carrying out a mission code-named "The Special Operation," which involves penetrating fortified locations to free the

nuclear scientists, who are moved from Iraq to Israel.

To complete the game successfully, players have to enter Israel to rescue the nuclear scientists, kill U.S. and Israeli troops and seize their laptops containing secret information.

If players fail a mission, a message pops up saying: "With resistance, you can battle the enemy." Iran's red, white and green flag flutters in the top right corner throughout the game.

"We tried to promote the idea of defense, sacrifice and martyrdom in this game," Fakhrian said.

Fakhrian said his group was trying to market the video game first in Iran and other Muslim countries. But the group also has plans to bring the game, which comes on a CD for computers, to Western countries, he said.

The game comes from the same student group that was behind the infamous "World Without Zionism" conference in 2005 where President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be "wiped off the map."

Ali Reza Masaeli, leader of the group that designed the new game, said it took three years for his technical team to produce it. The team was based in Isfahan, a city in central Iran that houses a nuclear site.

"It is an entirely Iranian product in response to the U.S. cyber war against Iran," Masaeli said.

This game follows the free "Assault on Iran" online series from New York-based Kuma Reality Games. That game simulates U.S. Special Forces destroying the Natanz uranium enrichment facility in central Iran. A message left with Kuma's public relations agency was not immediately returned.

Time For Baseball!

Hardcore baseball fans, dust off that PlayStation 2 because the champ is back.

Just in time for spring training, Sony's *MLB 07: The Show* builds on the success of its predecessor, "MLB 06: The Show."

Making its way to center stage once again in "MLB 07: The Show" is the expansive and multifaceted Career Mode.

For those unfamiliar with Career Mode, you take control of one of baseball's raising stars from spring training to the championships.

But this year, Career Mode takes a fork in the road.

You can play from two different modes within the career mode. In the traditional mode, you take a rookie through the development of his career on a team where you play regular games with your rookie in the mix. The other option is the "road to the show" where you take that player and you can only use him throughout the game. It's good because it creates a more focused center of play.

As a result, actual games are shorter due to a fast-forward feature implemented by the developers. Essentially, you only play on defensive plays that involve your created rookie. It kind of takes away a bit from the everyday fielding by other positions but keeps the focus on your player.

Sony has also given baseball novices another tool, which is called Adaptive Pitch Intelligence. Basically, the computer will help guide you as to which pitches are the best for this particular batter at that instant. Before you select a pitch, a selected pitch will be highlighted. It’s as if the catcher is calling the pitch for you.

Another addition to "MLB 07: The Show" is a feature called the Umpire Personalities. The aim of this feature is to drive home the fact that every umpire calls a game differently. Each umpire will have unique tendencies and animations. Basically, each umpire will have a different definition of what the strike zone should be. This provides for very tricky play, especially when you’re on the mound.

Graphically, the PS2 version doesn’t change much from last years "MLB 06." Controls are fairly easy to learn, even for non-baseball fans. Also, MLB.com Headline News now features a Live MLB Ticker that will show the live status of all MLB games going on around the league.

All of the bells and whistles that made "MLB 06: The Show" a smash hit are back. King of the Diamond, Franchise Mode, Home Run Derby, and Rivalry Mode are all available, as well as playing a simple exhibition game against a buddy.

As with most sports games, the athlete on the cover is a big deal. If the publisher selects a player who turns out to be terrible, he will never hear the end of it. The cover honor for this baseball simulation go to an the New York Mets’ young gun David Wright.

"MLB 07: The Show" can also be found for the PSP with most of the cool stuff included, such as Adaptive Pitch Intelligence.

Overall, "MLB 07: The Show" is a tight package and has much to offer. Online play is great with all new options.

We here at *GameCore* headquarters can’t wait for the PlayStation 3 version, which sadly isn’t available now, but should be available by opening day. For now, the PS2 version should suffice. The career mode expansion alone should be more than enough for gamers to pick this one up.

MLB 07: The Show is rated "E" for Everyone (content suitable for ages 6 or older) and is available exclusively on the PlayStation 3, PlayStation 2 and PSP game consoles.

Vid-Game Review: ’Darkness’ Is Different

Shut off the lights and prepare for an entertaining blend of mafioso-meets-macabre in the new video game "The Darkness" for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360.

This M-rated, $59.99 first-person shooter, based on the comic-book series of the same name, dares to be different - and for the most part succeeds.

The surprisingly interesting story centers on mobster Jackie Estacado. He soon finds himself on the bad side of a deal gone wrong with his employer, who just happens to be the Don of the New York mafia.

So what does he do? Well, what does any trained assassin do? He kills stuff.

In "The Darkness," that includes pretty much everything in his path - mobsters, police officers and random strangers - in a blood-soaked zeal to exact revenge on his former employers.

He has a variety of weapons, including pistols and shotguns, at his disposal.

What makes this game different from other first-person shooters are the demonic powers Estacado gains as the game progresses.

You see, Estacado isn’t just a professional killer. He’s also somehow become possessed by evil spirits, giving him a pair of grisly, snarling tentacle-like serpents that sprout from his shoulders with the tap of a button.

He can summon this "Darkness" mode and other powers at will, and with devastating results on his enemies.

He gains the ability to withstand gunshot wounds more effectively, and his supernatural abilities add various possibilities. I was able to guide one of the tentacles around corners to take out enemies from afar, for example.

You also can summon little demonic buddies who’ll help unlock doors and fight for you. (Just be sure to shoot out all the street lamps; demons in this world don’t last long when exposed to light).

It’s this dynamic that makes the game so much fun. There’s shooting aplenty, but the demonic powers bring a new dimension to the action, making the game much more that a simple point and shoot affair.

Blood splatters everywhere and the language is definitely adults-only, but this is a game that lets you bring out your inner demon unlike any other.

I did have a few complaints. "The Darkness" has some excellent graphics but the screen is - surprise, surprise - very dark. I found it hard to see unless I shuttered the blinds and flicked off the lights.

Another complaint, though it is really a compliment of sorts, is that "The Darkness" felt too short and left me wanting more. I blew through the game in a couple days; more dedicated players could probably do it in one extended sitting.

"The Darkness" is proof that sometimes, anyway, it’s good to be bad.

Three stars out of four.

"Casual" The New Video Game Buzzword

Video game companies are hungrily eyeing the millions of people for whom mowing down alien invaders or battling ninjas holds limited appeal.

The video game industry's annual expo is always a showcase for testosterone-filled fighting and driving titles, but this year the word on the lips of many executives is 'casual.'

Driven by the runaway success of Nintendo Co. Ltd.'s motion-controlled Wii console, makers are pumping out games to play for a few minutes or on the run, such as puzzles and virtual card games - to the extent that some analysts worry the industry may be spreading itself too thinly.

"There may be a 'casual' glut by 2008," UBS analyst Ben Schachter wrote in a note to clients.

Kathy Vrabeck, head of the newly formed casual games unit at top publisher Electronic Arts Inc., said in an interview that "it's a very difficult business model," given a variety of platforms, from cell phones to consoles, for instance.

But EA devoted almost its entire media briefing at the E3 expo in Santa Monica, California this week to showing off new casual games such as Wii rhythm title "Boogie."

"We believe it's going to be the fastest-growing area within all of gaming," Vrabeck said.

UbiSoft, Europe's biggest publisher known for its slate of realistic military games, also lingered on the casual theme, showing off titles meant to appeal to women, such as "My Life Coach" for Nintendo's DS handheld.

The company expects casual games to account for 20 percent of its revenue this year, double last year's figure.

"It's not the better graphics, it's not the fancy controllers. What we're talking about is widening the nets, bringing more people into our industry," said Tony Key, UbiSoft's vice president of U.S. marketing.

The industry, whose global revenue topped $30 billion last year, has tried for years to shake the stereotype that its consumers consist chiefly of teen-age boys with too few social skills and too much leisure time.

Yet the Entertainment Software Association puts the age of the average game player at 33 years, and says 24 percent of players are over the age of 50. That's almost as much as the portion under the age of 18 - 28 percent.

The surge of interest in casual games is partly the result of shifting economics that have pressured the bottom lines of many firms.

An A-list title for new gaming consoles from Microsoft Corp. and Sony Corp. can now take four years to make and cost $30 million, two to three times the cost of games for the previous generation of machines.

Yet retail prices have only risen 20 percent, to $60 for a newly released top title.

Moreover, publishers' hopes that gamers would rush to adopt new hardware

were dashed by the high cost of the consoles. Fewer consoles in homes meant a smaller base of potential game buyers, and thus weaker sales of those costly new games.

By contrast, casual games, with their simpler graphics and controls, can cost well under $1 million and take just a few months to make. Although they might sell for as little as $5 to $30, they appeal to a broader audience.

Casual games also have their own set of challenges. While much of the focus has been on the Wii and DS due to their popularity, mobile phone and online games strongly appeal to women and older players.

A single mobile phone game may need to be tweaked to run on up to 300 different handset models, and unlike hard-core gamers who don't blink at spending hundreds of dollars a year on the newest games, the casual audience may not become repeat customers.

"Nintendo seems to be the one company that's expanding the gaming market, but there's some cause for concern there because who they're attracting is the casual gamer," said Van Baker, an analyst with research firm Gartner.

"That's something that someone picks up and does for 15 to 20 minutes and then they put it aside. The question is, in three months or six months, is the Wii going to be sitting in the corner forgotten?"

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

EU To Rule On Microsoft Appeal

The European Court of First Instance will give its long-awaited verdict in Microsoft Corp.'s antitrust appeal on Sept. 17, people involved in the matter said Tuesday.

It is by far the biggest antitrust case ever referred to the European Union's second highest court. The outcome of the appeal, which will have taken more than three years, will influence the future shape of the software industry and be a reference point for future antitrust cases, especially those in the fast-changing world of information technology.

The European Commission ruled in 2004 that Microsoft had abused the dominant position of its Windows OS to muscle in on other sectors of the software market.

By bundling Windows Media Player, its audio and video playing software, into Windows, Microsoft competed unfairly against rivals such as Real Networks Inc. and Apple Inc., the Commission ruled. And by failing to share technical information about how to interoperate with Windows PCs,

Microsoft managed to steal a march in the market for low-end server operating systems.

Microsoft appealed both threads of that ruling, and in April last year the court held a three-day hearing at which the Commission and Microsoft, together with their respective software industry allies, tried to convince the judges of their arguments.

There are four possible outcomes of September's decision, two of which are clear cut but unlikely, and the other two mixed and more probable.

First clear-cut but unlikely outcome: the court sides with the Commission on both parts of the case - media player and server interoperability. It deems Microsoft an obstacle to innovation in the software industry and orders the immediate break-up of the company, effectively appropriating the Windows operating system and making it a public utility.

Second clear cut but unlikely outcome: the court sides with Microsoft on both counts. It declares that the break-neck speed of change in the IT industry is defined by a string of monopolies and that one monopoly is inevitably overtaken by another in time. Therefore, regulators should not apply antitrust laws too strictly, and should allow dominant operators such as Microsoft to use all means to prolong and expand their dominance of a market.

More likely, the court will give a mixed ruling. It may side with the Commission on interoperability but uphold Microsoft's appeal of the bundling ruling. Microsoft is ordered to release all interoperability information to rivals immediately. The result would be growth of Microsoft's largest direct rivals, at its expense, and a flattening of the software market as we know it today, with Microsoft brought slightly more into line with the likes of Sun Microsystems Inc., Oracle Corp.and IBM Corp. It would also open up Microsoft Office to open source software rivals, who until now have been marginalized in the lucrative desktop application market.

However, Microsoft would no longer need to sell a second version of Windows with the Media Player stripped out, which it has been forced to do in Europe today, and it would most probably bundle more and more features with Windows in future, to the likely detriment of any halfway successful innovation from a software developer such as Google.

In a nutshell, this outcome would restore fair competition in the software markets that existed in the 20th century but it would do nothing to impede Microsoft from muscling in on new markets that have already started to emerge this century.

Alternatively, Microsoft could lose the bundling argument but win on the interoperability side. The Court orders Microsoft to set up a separate company to sell a completely unbundled version of Windows, a turbo-charged "edition N," if you like (the name for its version of Windows without Media Player). This separate entity would be free to compete with the fully bundled version, and free to strike partnerships with any other software developer.

However, Microsoft could still withhold information about Windows from rivals to handicap them in some markets, such as the low-end server operating system market. This would allow Microsoft to dominate the traditional, office-based computing environment, at the expense of rivals such as Sun Microsystems, IBM and Oracle.

Put simply, this outcome would secure Microsoft in all the fat, but mature markets connected to the office environment, but would limit its ability to fend off challenges in new fields linked to the Internet.

The third of these outcomes is the likeliest, according to lawyers following the case, although none would be quoted predicting the court's decision.

FBI, Military Names Being Used In E-mail Scams

The FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) is warning of fraudulent e-mails that appear to come from the FBI and U.S. military.

"The IC3 has increasingly received intelligence of fraudulent schemes misrepresenting the FBI and/or Director Robert S. Mueller III," the center said in an alert published Tuesday. "The fraudulent e-mails give the appearance of legitimacy due to the usage of pictures of the FBI Director, seal, letterhead, and/or banners."

The spam is actually pumping lotteries or are phony inheritance notifications, the IC3 said.

Other scams use the FBI's name to "intimidate and convince the recipient the e-mail is legitimate," the IC3 said. Criminals have used the agency's name in extortion e-mails and online auction scams as well.

The IC3 is a clearinghouse for complaints of criminal activity on the Internet. Run jointly by the FBI and the National White Collar Crime Center, it works with other law enforcement agencies and industries to help crack down on illegal online activity.

In a separate statement also issued Tuesday, the IC3 warned that scammers were also sending out fraudulent e-mail claiming to be from U.S. soldiers stationed overseas. "The scam e-mails vary in content; however, the general theme of each is to request personal information and/or funds from the individual receiving the e-mail," the IC3 said.

The e-mails are variations on long-running scams such as the Nigerian "419" spam, which has been "surprisingly effective at extracting large amounts of cash from victims.," said Adam O'Donnell, a senior research scientist at antispam vendor Cloudmark.

"Users have to be aware that anyone asking for your bank account information via e-mail, regardless of their stated reason, is trying to steal your hard-earned money," he said.

FBI Uses Spyware To Track Bomb Hoax

A recently released FBI affidavit in the prosecution of a suspected bomb hoaxer has revealed the development and deployment of an FBI spyware program called the Computer & Internet Protocol Address Verifier (CIPAV).

According to Special Agent Norm B. Sanders, Jr., who applied for an

affidavit authorizing the use of CIPAV, the program is capable of secretly sending to the FBI information about a computer's IP and MAC addresses, other environment variables, and certain registry-type information.

Lauren Weinstein, cofounder of People for Internet Responsibility and moderator of the Privacy Forum, said he was not surprised by the information contained in the affidavit.

"Look, many people have known or suspected for a significant time that various agencies are using this technique for surveillance," he said. "It was inevitable that this type of software tool would be developed by law enforcement, particularly given the advances in techniques for concealing and encrypting electronic information."

The search warrant authorizing the use of CIPAV was sought in the case of 15-year-old Josh Glazebrook, a student at Timberline High School in Washington who was suspected of making bomb threats. A handwritten note containing a threat was discovered on May 30, and the high school subsequently received e-mail threats and was hit by a denial-of-service attack.

A week later, another student reported receiving an invitation from a MySpace account with the handle "Timberlinebombinfo," asking her to post a link to the bomb threats on her MySpace page. She reported the invitation to local law enforcement, which subsequently learned that 33 students had received a similar invitation.

When the FBI traced the IP address of the e-mail and MySpace accounts, they were led to a hijacked computer in the National Institute of Nuclear Physics in Italy. Having reached a dead end, they determined that the next step was to send CIPAV to the e-mail address from which the bomb threats were sent.

The information collected by CIPAV led to the arrest of Glazebrook, who pleaded guilty on Monday to identity theft, felony harassment, and making bomb threats. He was sentenced to 90 days in juvenile detention.

While noting that the Glazebrook case is not particularly remarkable, Weinstein said that it does raise concerns about the power of CIPAV and what types of information is being gathered by law enforcement. "Once you've got something like this on someone's computer," he noted, "you can basically do anything and learn everything about what that person is doing."

The recent revelations about scope of the FBI's use of National Security Letters, Weinstein said, undermines the overall confidence in security and law enforcement agencies, and raises questions about whether a program like CIPAV will only be used as the FBI says it is being used.

"If techniques like this are going to be used by the FBI and other agencies," Weinstein said, "then we need to have 100 percent trust in the agencies about when such tools will be deployed and under what circumstances. That's the challenge for this society."

Bots Beware: Symantec's AntiBot Is Here

Bots everywhere, beware. Symantec announced on Tuesday the release of

Norton AntiBot, which the company is calling the first targeted security solution for consumers wishing to fight the "growing botnet pandemic."

The security software firm said that Norton AntiBot is a real-time "bot detection and removal solution" that continually monitors PC applications and processes while complementing existing protections.

AntiBot uses behavior-based detection, according to Symantec, which means that the software looks at how files and applications are functioning so that malware can be detected and removed as soon as suspicious behavior shows up.

Bots are a growing threat to networked computer users, and are thought to be used in many criminal schemes as hard-to-trace robot workers often controlled by a single botmaster. Symantec said that there were more than six million active bots in the last six months of 2006, about 30 percent more than the previous six months.

Rowan Trollope, a Symantec senior vice president, pointed out that most of those users did not realize that their computers were being hijacked for malicious purposes.

Bots can take over a computer’s processes, usually secretly, turning the PC into the computer equivalent of one of those aliens in Invasion of the Body Snatchers. According to Symantec, if bots are improperly removed, sometimes they can simply reinstall themselves.

But some observers are resisting the layered, multipackage, multipricetag approach to keeping their computers secure. Networked PCs these days seem to have as many layers of protection as a deli in a neighborhood caught between warring gangs.

AntiBot adds "yet another application to the list of security tools needed by PC users to avoid computer takeover attacks," ZDNet’s Ryan Naraine wrote in his blog on Tuesday. Naraine said that computer security products, including antivirus, antispyware, antirootkit, antispam, and others, suck "valuable system resources under the guise of protecting you from hacker attacks."

Symantec, for instance, is suggesting that AntiBot be used in conjunction with its Norton AntiVirus, Norton Internet Security, and Norton 360 packages.

For those who do want to add another layer of protection to their computer security, Norton AntiBot is available for $29.99, which includes a one-year subscription to updates.

Cyber Extortionists Reappear, Attack U.S. Companies

Online extortionists have resurfaced, breaking into users’ systems, encrypting their data, and then holding it hostage until a $300 ransom is paid.

A cyberblackmailer tormented users in Russia between 2005 and 2006. Now the extortionists have reappeared, according to researchers at Moscow-based Kaspersky Lab. And it also appears they’ve branched outside Russian borders.

"It is easy to imagine how upset a user would be when they wake up on a sunny June morning and discover that their files are unusable: either they can't be opened or, in the case of .txt files, they contain garbage," wrote Olga Emelyanova and Denis Nazarov in a blog last year. "And it's not only MS Office documents - over 80 different types of files are affected."

GpCode, which used RSA algorithms to encrypt the users' data, has popped back up again on the Internet, with users outside of Russia reporting that their documents, photos, and archived files have been tampered with, reported Aleks Gostev, Kaspersky's senior virus analyst, in a blog entry.

Researchers at Prevx, a U.K.-based Internet security company, reported that the attackers have hit major U.S. companies and government agencies. Prevx discovered a Trojan called NTOS.exe. A spokesman for Prevx said they believe the same attackers are using two different tools.

"Prevx feels it is critical for these major organizations and government agencies to block any and all access to their computers and systems by any of the stolen passwords," said Prevx CEO Mel Morris, in a statement. "It's possible that the authors of this malware, and any parties to whom they may already have sold information, could gain what appears to be legitimate access to the compromised systems. This could also lead to further access to additional confidential information."

According to Kaspersky, the users under attack found that their documents were turned into junk data, while a file called "read_me.txt" was left on their systems.

The message, according to Gostev, reads, "You will need at least few years to decrypt these files without our software. All your private information for last 3 months were collected and sent to us. To decrypt your files you need to buy our software. The price is $300 If you will not contact us until 07/15/2007 your private information will be shared and you will lost all your data."

The message is signed by the "Glamorous Team."

The malware, which Kaspersky named Virus.Win32.Gpcode.ai, has a limited shelf life, from July 10 to July 15, reported Gostev.

Prevx is making decryption software available free of charge to consumers and businesses whose computers may have become infected and encrypted by the malware. Additional information is available at this Web site.

Prevx researchers, though, say the extortion is just a cover for the attackers' true intent - harvesting sensitive information, like logons and IP addresses.

Data-Stealing Trojan Disclosure Frustrates Researchers, Vendors, and Law Enforcement

There are two questions in the realm of IT security that simply won't go away: Can cybercrooks successfully attack at will, and are those who report the details of these attacks causing more harm than good? The revelation earlier this week by a security vendor and research firm that

a Trojan-horse may have stolen sensitive information from hundreds of businesses and government entities has revived this heated debate.

U.K.-based security vendor Prevx says its software last week detected a program running on customers' computers that behaved suspiciously, creating an outbound HTTP connection to a Web site and sending information out of customers' IT environments. "These were classic behaviors of an information-stealing Trojan," Prevx CEO Mel Morris told InformationWeek.

Further study led Prevx researchers to a directory on a Web site identified as www.martin-golf.net/pajero, which was live up until Tuesday afternoon Eastern Time but has since been taken down. The directory offered a list of 494 different computers (identified by their IP addresses) that were running the mysterious program Prevx had found. The program encrypted sensitive information such as logins and passwords while leaving an online ransom note informing the victim that all of their private information for the last three months had been taken and that they needed to pay $300 to buy software from the cybercrook that could decrypt the info.

Morris noted that the martin-golf.net directory was just a front for the cyberscam and that site's owner likely had no knowledge their site was being misused in this way.

Prevx, having determined that this was the work of a Trojan that had infected computers at hundreds of businesses and government agencies, notified U.K. law enforcement as well as the FBI in the U.S., Morris said. The next step was to send copies of the malware to a number of other security vendors, whose products Morris claimed had failed to detect the Trojan, which was relatively unsophisticated in that it didn't use a rootkit or techniques for hiding itself.

Here's where the story gets a bit contentious and exemplifies the competitiveness in the security vendor market as well as the fine line that security researchers walk when they want to disclose their findings.

Morris said that he and his team on July 14 alerted the FBI to the presence of this Trojan and had a conference call with the agency the following day. Prevx told the agency that it had identified 494 computer systems that had encrypted and transmitted about 200 Mbytes worth of data, which Prevx had decrypted only to find logins, passwords, and other sensitive data. "The FBI said they would be moving forward with their investigation," he said. The FBI confirmed that they had been contacted by Prevx, but would provide no further details nor confirm whether the July 15 discussion took place.

Prevx has spoken freely about which companies it contacted to inform them that they'd been hit by the Trojan. Morris claimed that the Trojan was found inside IT systems belonging to American Airlines, Booz Allen Hamilton, and the State Department, although none of them would comment on Prevx's story. Morris characterized their reaction to Prevx as ranging from apathetic responses ("they're too busy") to indignant responses that questioned Prevx's credentials.

Likewise, Prevx claimed to have contacted several security vendors to alert them that their products had not caught the Trojan. One of the security vendors, Trend Micro, acknowledged that it was aware of the Trojan and that its products can now detect and protect customers against this Trojan.

Yet Trend Micro was "ethically taken aback" by what they see as Prevx's cavalier attitude to go public so quickly with their research, David Perry, global director of education told InformationWeek.

Trend Micro, however, is no stranger to controversy over security disclosure. In late September, 2006, the company, which had been studying software bots and promoting a service to detect such bots, reported finding bot infestations in numerous government agencies. Trend Micro's list included the Defense Department, the Navy Network Information Center, and the Pittsburgh Supercomputing Center. Several organizations on the list challenged Trend Micro's research.

While it's not clear how much damage the Trojan in question has caused or why its creators were asking for only $300 in ransom, it is obvious that the IT industry, its customers, and law enforcement still aren't on the same page when it comes to finding, reporting, and fixing security threats.

Former Spammer: 'I Know I'm Going to Hell'

"Ed," a retired spammer, built a considerable fortune sending e-mails that promoted pills, porn and casinos. At the peak of his power, Ed says he pulled in US$10,000 to $15,000 a week, storing the money in $20 bills in stacks of boxes.

It was a life of greed and excess, one that preyed especially on vulnerable people hoping to score drugs or win money gambling on the Internet. From when he was expelled from high school at 17 until he quit his spam career at 22, Ed - who does not reveal his full name but sometimes goes by SpammerX - was part of an electronic underworld profiting from the Internet via spam.

"Yes, I know I'm going to hell," said Ed, who spoke in London on Wednesday at an event hosted by IronPort Systems Inc., a security vendor now owned by Cisco Systems Inc. "I'm actually a really nice guy. Trust me."

A quick-witted and affable guy who wears an earring and casual clothes, there was a time when Ed wasn't so nice. He sent spam to recovering gambling addicts enticing them to gambling Web sites. He used e-mail addresses of people known to have bought antianxiety medication or antidepressants and targeted them with pharmaceutical spam.

In short, Ed said he was "basically what people hate about the Internet."

He spent 10 hours a day, seven days a week studying how to send spam and avoid filtering technologies in security software designed to weed out garbage e-mail. Most spam filters are effective 99 percent of the time; he aimed for that remaining window, using tricks such as including slightly different images in his spam, which can fool filters into thinking the e-mail is legitimate.

"The better I got at spam, the more money I made," Ed said.

He would start a spam run by finding an online merchant who wanted to sell a product. Then he'd acquire a list of e-mail addresses - another commodity that has spawned its own market in the world of spam. He'd also set up a domain name, included as a link in a spam message, that, if

clicked, would redirect the recipient to the merchant’s Web site, enabling Ed to get credit for the referral.

The spam would then be sent from a network of hacker-controlled computers, called botnets. Those machines are often consumer PCs infected with malicious software that a hacker can control. Ed would "rent" time on those computers from another group of hackers that specialized in creating botnets.

If one of the spam recipients bought something, Ed would get a percentage of the sale. For pharmaceuticals the commission was around 50 percent, he said.

Response rates to spam tend to be a fraction of 1 percent. But Ed said he once got a 30 percent response rate for a campaign. The product? A niche type of adult entertainment: photos of fully clothed women popping balloons.

To track the money, merchants set up a "referral sales page" where spammers can see how much they make from a spam run. Ed would log in frequently, watching the money increase. He was paid into electronic payment transfer accounts, such as e-gold or PayPal, or into his debit card account, which he could cash out in $20 bills.

That became problematic when the cash became voluminous. He says he made $480,000 his last year of spamming. But the lifestyle of being a spammer was taking a toll. In essence, he had no life.

It’s hard to go into a bar and explain your job to a woman by saying "I advertise penis enlargement pills online," Ed said. "It doesn’t go down very well."

He rationalized his actions by saying spamming is not like robbing someone, although the lurid impact of spam was clear. Some nine million Americans have some dependence on prescription drugs, Ed said, and he noticed that the same people were buying different drugs each month. "These were addicts," he said.

Additionally, "the product is always counterfeit to some degree. If you’re lucky, sometimes it’s a diluted version of the real thing," he said. Viagra is cut with amphetamines, and homemade pills are common from sketchy labs in countries such as China, India and Fiji, Ed said.

So Ed got out of the business. He’s written a book, "Inside the Spam Cartel: Trade Secrets from the Dark Side," which he said has had some take-up in law enforcement circles eager to learn more about the spam business, which he projects will only get worse.

As broadband speeds increase, spammers will increasingly look to market goods by making VOIP (voice over Internet Protocol) calls or sending out videos, Ed said. The ultimate unsolvable problem is users, who continue to buy products marketed by spam, making the industry possible.

"I think in 10 years we’ll still get spam," Ed said. "Be prepared to be bombarded."

Wal-Mart To Sell $300 PC With OpenOffice

Wal-Mart opened its campaign for the back-to-school PC sales season on Wednesday by unveiling a $298 desktop from Everex that combines three of the most popular industry trends - open-source software, a power-efficient processor, and a lack of "bloatware."

The Everex Impact GC3502 uses Microsoft's Windows Vista OS but substitutes the OpenOffice.org 2.2 version of word processing and spreadsheet tools for the traditional Microsoft Office variety. The computer runs on a 1.5GHz C7-D processor from Via Technologies, a chip that meets lead-free environmental regulations and saves energy with low wattage demands.

The sales price does not include a monitor but is still lower than comparable packages sold on Wal-mart's Web site, such as an HP Compaq Presario, an Acer America AcerPower FH Minitower, and a Dell Dimension desktop.

PC vendors usually compete for customers by slashing prices during the eight-week back-to-school season, stretching from mid-July to mid-September. But Everex also hopes to attract buyers by avoiding the free "trial software" that annoys many users, according to Eugene Chang, a product manager at Everex, of Fremont, California.

Dell followed a similar strategy on July 10 when it withheld bloatware from its new Vostro line of PCs for small business users after a long campaign by bloggers and Dell customers against common practice by PC vendors of loading unrequested software onto new computers. Software companies fund the effort as a way to find new users.

Although those features are popular, they could backfire on Everex because most U.S. consumers are not yet familiar with Via processors or OpenOffice software, one analyst said.

"It's not surprising that Wal-Mart, of all retailers, will sell the $298 Everex desktop; it's a good marriage with their biggest audience - budget buyers," said Toni DuBoise, a senior analyst with Current Analysis West.

"But it has a couple of problems; one is that it uses a Via processor, which is almost unknown to U.S. consumers. And it runs at just 1.5 GHz, so it's unknown how it will handle Microsoft Vista," she said. "And running OpenOffice is kind of a unique tactic. It's anti-Microsoft as Microsoft obviously owns the market for productivity software. So users may have some concerns about compatibility."

Firefox Nipping at IE's Heels in Europe

According to the latest results from European researchers, Firefox has been rapidly gaining market share in Europe and elsewhere overseas at the expense of Internet Explorer.

The French research firm Xiti Monitor reported that Firefox gained nearly 7 percent of market share among European Web surfers during the past year, and 3.7 percent over the past four months. In the first week of July 2007, according to the Xiti Monitor data, Firefox held 27.8 percent of the European market.

Meanwhile, Firefox's share of North America's browser market has only

grown by 3 percent over the past year to reach 18.9 percent, XiTi Monitor reported. So it is clear that Firefox still has a long way to go when taking on Internet Explorer on Microsoft’s home turf.

As far as worldwide appeal, global Web statistics organization W3 Counter reported that Internet Explorer held a 66.48 percent share of the worldwide browser market during the past week, followed by Firefox at 23.84 percent.

"I think Firefox’s success in Europe of late is primarily due to the unbelievable media coverage it has been getting in the European press," said Forrester Research vice president and research director Thomas Mendel, who is based in Germany. "I mean, it’s everywhere; it’s in every magazine you buy and read."

Although Xiti Monitor reported that Internet Explorer remains the most used browser by far, the firm noted that IE is continuing to lose ground to its main rival in Europe. When researchers examined the results in specific European nations, they found that the use of Firefox has been soaring in countries such as Slovenia, Finland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland.

Mendel suggested that some European users might be avoiding Microsoft’s products due to its ongoing conflict with the European Union over antitrust issues. "I think the other really interesting development here in Europe is that the younger people have always used Linux and other forms of open-source software," Mendel explained. "And in the universities across Europe, students are strongly encouraged to use open-source tools."

The latest research indicates not only that Firefox is gaining ground against IE in Europe, but also that the browser is growing more popular in the Asia-Pacific region.

"The whole copyright awareness in Asia is slowly changing," Mendel said. When I lived in Hong Kong about 10 years ago, no one cared about copyright at all. Now countries such as Singapore are enforcing their copyright laws - which is why people there are getting more interested in using cheap or even free open-source software."

Apple CEO Steve Jobs recently announced a Windows version of its Safari Web browser. Some question how this might muddy the waters with respect to the global browser market.

"I think Apple will gain a small market share but I don’t think we are talking about a major market disruption," predicted Mendel, who said he expects Safari’s appeal to PC users overseas to remain limited.

YouTube Role Grows As U.S. Election Nears

In 2004, YouTube didn’t exist. Three years later, politicians have learned to fear and revere the video-sharing Web site that has become a vital part of the campaign for the 2008 U.S. presidential election.

From rapid dissemination of political blunders, often with funny tunes, to a new wave of music videos featuring scantily clad women singing the praises of their presidential favorites, YouTube.com has sparked a new

interest in politics.

More than 2.5 million people have viewed "I've Got a Crush...On Obama" about Democratic Sen. Barack Obama since it was posted last month. A rebuttal video of women fighting over Obama and leading Republican contender Rudy Giuliani has been watched more than 500,000 times in four days.

While much on YouTube is skewed to a U.S. audience, the company - bought by Web search leader Google Inc. last year for $1.65 billion - now has local sites reflecting that more than half of viewers are outside the United States.

Many candidates vying for their party's nomination to run for president have embraced the technological changes, holding polls via YouTube, asking for campaign input and making announcements on the site.

"In the past, the campaigns sort of stuck their toe into technology and innovation - it was a small detail of what was going on," said Phil Noble, founder of PoliticsOnline.

"The difference in this election is that technology has become fundamental. Every campaign has figured out ways to use YouTube all the time."

It's not just the candidates. YouTube members are getting in too, with thousands of people uploading video questions for upcoming CNN/YouTube debates.

By Friday midday, more than 1,700 videos had been put on YouTube's site for Monday's debate among Democratic andidates (http://www.youtube.com/contest/DemocraticDebate). The Republican debate will be on September 17.

Some 25 to 30 of the questions will be picked by a political team at CNN for the two-hour debate. Follow-up questions may also be asked by moderator Anderson Cooper.

Questions are about health care, Social Security, global warming and U.S. foreign policy. Some are serious, others are not. One man played a guitar and sang a song about whom the candidates would choose as running mates for vice president.

Will Wrigley, a 17-year-old who will turn 18 in time to vote in November 2008, asked the candidates for their views on stem cell research.

"I just decided I wanted to have one in," he said by e-mail.

The issue was important, Wrigley added, because it could "improve the health of the people in this nation and around the world."

Kim, a 36-year-old breast cancer patient from suburban New York, took off her wig while saying her chances for survival were not as good as they could have been because she - like tens of millions of Americans - had no health insurance.

"What would you as president do to make low-cost or free preventative medicine available for everyone in this country?" she asked.

CNN political director Sam Feist said the network decided to hold a

YouTube debate in part to highlight the enormous impact the Internet has on politics.

"Clearly the YouTube phenomenon is the perfect opportunity to merge new media and old media in a presidential debate," he said, adding that the unpredictable nature of the questions will make it harder for candidates to prepare.

Feist said the questions were asked by a diverse group of people - of all ages and from across the country and several foreign nations. He said he was surprised by the quality of the questions and that there were not more about the Iraq war.

Noble, who feels it is too early to call this a "YouTube election," said it will be fun to see even more innovation.

"What we're doing is putting the most powerful communications tools in the hands of millions of people all at one time and saying 'Tell us what you think about politics'."

You Have Mail... Way Too Much!

E-mail management is a critical mission that consumes many hours each week for an already busy I.T. administrator: Fighting spam. Recovering old messages. Securing the server. Indeed, the job is never done and the challenge is only getting worse.

According to the Radicati Group's recent E-mail Archiving Market Research report, the average corporate e-mail user processes about 18 MB of data every day, and, that number is expected to climb to 28 MB a day by 2011. While e-mail servers can handle large volumes of messages, storing so much data can be quite the challenge.

The storage problem has led to "purge policies" that demand old e-mails be deleted, but end users often find mailbox size restrictions quite limiting. Many of these solutions are far from ideal. Not only do they add another burden to the I.T. admin's back, they can also add more fees to the corporate budget. To complicate matters even further, today's I.T. administrators also need to ensure that their e-mail storage solutions are keeping their company in compliance with government regulations.

"Our research shows that storage is the number one messaging-management problem," said Michael Osterman, president of Osterman Research, a firm that focuses on the messaging market. "Organizations are experiencing plenty of pain in controlling messaging due to the growth of message volume and the increasing size of attachments. Companies are looking for new approaches."

Using an outside firm to manage your company's messaging systems is one option. Osterman estimates the number of hosted-messaging seats in North America at 1 million, while the Radicati Group forecasts that the worldwide market for hosted business e-mail services will grow from $626 million in 2006 to over $1 billion in 2010. There are plenty of reasons why more and more companies are using hosting and outsourcing services to manage their e-mail systems, said Sudeep Trivedi, director of product development at AT&T's USinternetworking (USi).

"E-mail has become the most difficult system to manage. Outlook is easy to use, but behind the scenes, messaging is a complex environment," Trivedi said. His perspective on the problem comes from his work at USi, which specializes in managing enterprise software and e-mail services available from companies like Oracle, PeopleSoft, Siebel, Microsoft, IBM, and Ariba.

"The time has come for CIOs and organizations to seriously start thinking about offloading some of these duties to a third-party provider so they can concentrate on things that are really important to them," Trivedi said. Hosted messaging saves cost, he said, because the organization is not investing in hardware or message management. I.T. administrators are also freed from dealing with spam, antivirus engines and denial-of-service attacks on the e-mail servers - all costly propositions.

Beyond the drain on I.T. administrators' time, the growing volumes of e-mail messages also hamper end-user productivity. Researchers at Gartner estimate that business users spend about two hours per day managing their mailboxes, while data from Ferris Research shows that 66 percent of users are forced to work around maximum file-size restrictions on e-mail messages.

One potential solution to help solve the problem of e-mail storage is being offered by IBM in the form of a "social software" product called Lotus Connections. The Lotus Connections platform consists of five components for managing activities, communities, profiles, blogs, and "dogear" - IBM's lingo for bookmarking Web pages and sharing those bookmarks with friends or associates. The "activities" tab lets employees park documents, presentations and other collaborative content in a shared space.

"We are trying to get out in front of this ongoing trend for e-mail inboxes to grow and grow and grow by reducing the e-mail people are sending," said Penny Scharfman, program director for Lotus Notes and Domino Products. "We're doing that by providing strong tools to help manage and store documents in a smart way. This solution [Lotus Connections] stops the attachments from coming into your mailbox in the first place."

Another solution to the messaging madness involves archiving systems that take the content off the mail server and store it on lower-cost alternatives. This option relies on a technique called "stubbing" wherein if a user gets a message that exceeds a predefined limit, say 100 MB, or if the user exceeds 80 percent of his or her allowable quota for e-mail, the content is automatically removed from the mail server and put into storage.

The messages are then replaced with a stub - a link back to the archived message - in the user's mailbox. If the user clicks on the stub, it pulls the content out of the archives and displays it on the screen. By some industry estimates, this technique can reduce the volume of I.T. server storage by as much as 80 percent without limiting user access to old messages.

According to Osterman, archiving systems offer several advantages. First, archival storage is less expensive than live storage. Second, if the e-mail server goes down, it takes much less time to restore the e-mail if most of the messages do not reside on that server. Otherwise, he noted, users could go a day or two without e-mail access as the I.T. admin works

feverishly to restore hundreds of gigabytes of data.

With this type of system in place, Osterman said he thinks, "Users will stop complaining about quotas."

"It’s not likely that the individual user will ever reach a 100MB quota with stubbing, even though [that user] may have tens of gigabytes of data in the archive," he said. Osterman pointed out that archiving has traditionally been used for purposes of regulatory compliance or electronic discovery, and is now being adopted more widely in the mainstream as a storage management tool.

For all the solutions that are vying for dominance in the hearts of CIOs, analysts say none of them are end-all solutions. Messaging management, like other aspects of technology, will continue to evolve. It does seem though that a tiered approach to archival storage that incorporates spinning discs and optical storage could further reduce messaging costs.

"As your storage requirements grow, you can actually drive the cost down a little bit by going to different subsystems," Osterman said. For example, he suggested, if data is a year old, you may need it for an e-discovery case but it’s unlikely that users are going to need frequent access to it. Instead of keeping such data on expensive drives, he advised, "You can store it on lower-cost, less readily-accessible media."

While none of these solutions provides the silver-bullet solution that businesses may want, a combination of strategies can offer at least some relief when users are hearing, "You’ve got mail... and it’s way too much!"

Internet-Call Service SunRocket Cuts Off Service

SunRocket Inc., the second biggest U.S. supplier of Internet phone services, appeared to have shut down its business on Monday without notifying its customers, which total more than 200,000.

Vienna, Virginia-based SunRocket, which is a rival to Vonage Holdings in the home and small business market for Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) phone services, gave no warning it was shutting down operations on its Web site.

Callers to its customer service line heard a brief recorded message, saying: "We are no longer taking customer service or sales calls. Goodbye."

Companies offering calls over the Web were seen as rivals to established carriers when they sprouted up a few years ago, but many are having a difficult time financially competing against their big, deep-pocketed and entrenched rivals.

Calls and e-mails to SunRocket by Reuters were not returned.

A report in the New York Times quoted an unnamed source that had been briefed on the company’s status as saying that SunRocket had ceased operation and plans to move its customers to one or more companies.

Customers, many of them lured by SunRocket’s offer of unlimited phone

calling for one year for an upfront fee of $199 within the Canada, the United States and Puerto Rico, reported patchy service or full outages on Monday on Web sites such as FatWallet.com and DSLReports.com.

SunRocket was founded in 2004 and backed by top-name Silicon Valley venture capital firms Blue Run Ventures, formerly known as Nokia Venture Partners, Doll Capital Management and the Mayfield Fund. No one was immediately available to comment at the three financial backers.

ViaTalk, a rival to SunRocket based in Clifton Park, New York, issued a statement offering a contract buyout to SunRocket customers.

The company added it was offering a coupon for free shipping of ViaTalk phone equipment to customers looking to switch services, although it did not lay out the what the overall cost to SunRocket customers would be.

ViaTalk offers a similar $199 per year calling deal. ViaTalk was founded in 2005 and is an offshoot of a Web hosting company, HostRocket.com. Spokesman Tom Nardacci said the company had between 50,000 and 100,000 customers.

Vonage, which has reported losses since it held its initial public offering in May of 2006, has been locked in a patent battle with Verizon Communications. It is struggling to retain customers who fear service disruptions owing to its legal woes.

Independent VoIP providers face mounting competition from established cable television and telephone companies who offer alternative services as part of packages that may include landline, broadband Internet, TV or mobile phone services.

It’s No Secret: Facebook’s Allure Is Its Privacy

The secret of Facebook’s success, and its future viability, hinges on how the social network site protects privacy, taming the anything-goes intrusiveness of what might as well be known as the World Wild Web.

Chris Kelly, Facebook’s chief privacy officer, said users want greater control over who sees their personal information, rather than expecting total privacy, or anonymity, the concept underlying much of the legal thinking on privacy for more than a century.

"Privacy is beginning to transform from the classic ’right to be left alone’ to this notion that ’I want control over my information,"’ Kelly said in an interview on the sidelines of a Fortune Magazine technology conference held here last week.

Started in 2004 by then-undergraduate Mark Zuckerberg as a social site for fellow Harvard University students, Facebook has been opened up over the last year to users of all ages, who have a degree of control over who sees what personal details.

These privacy controls paradoxically encourage users to reveal more about themselves within their approved circle of friends than they would do on the wide-open Web. As a result, many post mobile phone numbers, reveal political loyalties or even show changes in their dating status for friends to see.

Facebook has seen membership spike 25 percent to more than 30 million since May, when it turned the site into a big tent for outsiders to build software inside it. This lets users engage in online activities while limiting exposure to security pitfalls.

"We have tried to take a very control-based approach for our users, so Facebook information doesn't leak out on the Web in general," Kelly said. "Privacy, as anonymity, is declining, but privacy, as control, is on the rise."

As a company, Facebook's livelihood hinges on how it balances the trade-offs between privacy and openness.

The free, advertising-supported site runs a limited number of conventional Web banner ads. But it also is looking at how to offer ads that match people's expressed interests without frightening users that their data will be abused by marketers.

"In a trusted environment you share more," Kelly said of the business logic of insuring privacy. "There is an opportunity to target advertising, as long as you keep that trusted environment."

Facebook board member and financial backer Jim Breyer, a partner at venture capital firm Accel Partners, said the company would do well over $100 million in revenue in 2007, be profitable, and have significant positive cash flow this year.

Breyer also sought to knock down rumors the company may be for sale - the latest speculation last week was that Microsoft Corp. should consider paying $6 billion for Facebook.

"We continue to focus on building the best stand-alone company we can be and, simply said, are not for sale," Breyer said via e-mail on Saturday.

Facebook is no privacy nirvana, nor does it mean to be.

Indeed, its core function is to enable a kind of virtual voyeurism that makes it easy for members to post comments, photos and videos about their own lives while keeping tabs on what their network of online friends are up to.

It does this by offering an automated news feed of what friends are doing on their own Facebook profile pages - a kind of gossip column among friends.

Highlighting the tension over privacy at the core of the site, when the feature was introduced last September, members temporarily revolted until the company introduced greater controls over what information their friends could see.

In another example of how privacy protections play out on Facebook, photos are often shared among users, but individuals retain the right to delete their names from photo labels, providing a degree of insulation from personal embarrassment.

While large and growing, Facebook functions like an endless series of online private clubs. The average Facebook user has access to only one in 200 of its members, Kelly said.

Among diehard Facebook users, many of whom have hundreds of connections to friends, a more subtle privacy complaint arises. As it now stands, Facebook software treats friends pretty much equally, a byproduct of its college-campus roots.

But as more users add different types of contacts - bosses, family members, colleagues, business acquaintances - demand grows for more refined privacy controls to distinguish between various types of real-world relationships.

Kelly said the company was working to address the issue. "Stay tuned: We are all about user control," he said.

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